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ABSTRACT

Children's perceptions of the roles of mother, father, and teacher were examined in a sample of 31 boys and 28 girls attending full-time day care, half-day kindergarten, or some combination of child care arrangements. Interview data were coded into four main role categories under the headings of Domestic, Child Care, Paid Work, and Personal. The first two categories included seven sub-categories each. Sub-categories of the domestic role were meal preparation, cleaning, shopping, washing, sewing, outdoor tasks, and house/car repairs. Sub-categories of the child care role were custodial, play/stimulation, outings, physical punishment, verbal punishment, positive socio-emotional, and encourages. Results revealed that mothers were perceived as doing more domestic work and providing more custodial child care than fathers or teachers. Teachers were seen as most involved in play and stimulation, with fathers less and mothers least involved. Despite the fact that more than two-thirds of the mothers were employed, fathers were much more likely to be perceived as doing paid work than were mothers or teachers. Type of early childhood center experience was not clearly related to children's perceptions of adult roles. In general, findings showed both overlap and differentiation between children's views of mother, father, and teacher. (Author/RH)

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Preschool Children's Perceptions of Parent and Teacher Roles

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Running Head: ROLE PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

Aspects of children's perceptions of the roles of mother, father and teacher were examined in a sample of 31 boys and 28 girls attending 3 types of early childhood centre, full-time childcare, kindergarten and combined care. Interview data were coded into 4 main role categories of Domestic, Child care, Paid Work and Personal. Results showed that mothers were perceived as doing the most domestic work and custodial child care. Teachers were seen as doing the most play/stimulation, followed by fathers with mothers doing the least. Fathers were much more likely to be perceived as doing paid work than mothers or teachers despite the fact that more than two thirds of the mothers were in paid employment. Type of early childhood centre experience showed no clear relationship with children's perceptions of adult roles. The results showed both overlap and some differentiation between children's views of mother, father and teacher.

Preschool Children's Perceptions of Teacher and Parent Roles

The present study investigated preschool children's understandings of the role of mother, father and teacher, and their perceptions of the transition from home to preschool. The research asked if childrens' perceptions of mother, father and teacher were similar or different, and if these perceptions were influenced by the type of early childhood setting the children attended.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that the perceptions that make up a child's psychological environment are shaped by the roles, activities and interpersonal structures in which the child participates. What is "perceived, desired, feared, thought about and acquired as knowledge" represents the content of concept development and results from interaction with the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 9). Perceptions are not mere reflections of the environment, however, because children actively construct their social world. Therefore, children's reports about their beliefs and experiences will help us to understand those aspects of the world which are salient for them and to which they attend at a particular time.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that links between different settings (the mesosystem) are of particular importance, and that supportive connections between home and preschool may facilitate development. If children experience home and early childhood centre as separate and unrelated then their social world may seem fragmented and discontinuous. Yet if they experience home and early childhood centre as related this could lead to a more coherent understanding of their social world. One measure of coherence between settings, is overlap in concepts of the roles

of parents and teachers/caregivers.

Many previous studies of children's role perceptions have suggested that children perceive mothers' and fathers' roles as distinctive and sex stereotyped (eg Goldman & Goldman, 1983; Riach, 1982). Few studies, however, have dealt with preschool children and most studies have used a structured format that may have constrained children's reports of their perceptions. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that to be ecologically valid research must take into account the viewpoint of participants. The present study attempted to elicit the children's viewpoint with as few constraints as possible on how they might respond.

Children as young as 3 to 4-1/2 years have been able to describe parental roles in terms of several behaviours appropriate to the role (e.g. Watson & Amgott-Kwan, 1983). Carlson (1984), for example, examined 3 to 6 year-old children's perceptions of adult role behaviour in dual career and traditional families. Carlson used the Parent Role Perception Test (PRPT) which involves presenting coloured photographs of objects to the child who then chooses all, some or none of the objects portrayed as being used by either parent. Role stereotyping scores were derived from these responses. In families who shared caregiving, children held fewer traditional father stereotypes but there were no differences in mother stereotypes. Boys were much more likely to stereotype the maternal role than girls. Using the same instrument (the PRPT), Mills and Stevens (1985) found that day-care children perceived their mothers as more nurturing than home-care children.

Few researchers have compared children's perceptions of the roles of parents and teachers. Tephly and Elardo (1981), however, examined the question of how 5 year-old children perceive mothers and day-care teachers. Picture cards depicting the roles of mother and teacher were shown to each

child in a one-to-one interview situation and the child asked to say whether the card showed something that the child's mother or teacher did or felt. The study showed considerable overlap in perceptions of teacher and parent role involving support for physical, emotional and intellectual and social needs. The study did not include the role of fathers, and the technique used for eliciting children's perceptions was entirely structured by the interviewer with little room for children's independent perceptions to emerge.

A series of questions in a structured test-like format has often been used to determine how preschool children perceive their environment (e.g. Mills & Stevens, 1985). A possible disadvantage of such a strategy is that the questions asked may prompt children toward certain responses, while other aspects of their views on the world may not be assessed. A more open-ended interview approach has also been used in other studies of young children (Furth, 1980 ; Smith, 1985). Such a strategy, which was used in the present study, allows the respondents to determine the relevant parameters of the issue being addressed and to use their own concepts and language to report on their experiences and beliefs. A systematic content analysis of the reports can then identify the key issues and attitudes as they are perceived by those interviewed.

The children in the present study were in three main types of early childhood arrangement - full day childcare (day care), sessional kindergarten and combined care (more than one childcare arrangement outside the home). Although small sample size limited the study's focus on the effect of different types of early childhood setting on role perceptions, this was looked at in the study. The longer, more continuous experience and the more intense adult-child relationship in full-time childcare might

be expected to influence children to perceive their teachers as more like their parents. It was also possible that since most of their mothers worked, the full-time childcare children would perceive their mothers and fathers as having more similar roles.

The main research question in this study was whether preschool children perceived the roles and activities of their mother, father and teacher as similar or distinctive. Secondly the study asked whether role perceptions differed according to type of early childhood setting attended.

Method

Sample

The subjects of this study were 59 three and four year-old children, 31 boys and 28 girls, between the ages of 41 months and 60 months from Dunedin, a small provincial city in New Zealand (population about 100,000). The mean age was 52.05 months (s.d. = 5.33). There were 60 child subjects in the sample but 1 child would not answer any of the interviewer's questions. The socioeconomic status of the parents was above average (1.94), but parents were of varying socioeconomic status (Elley & Irving, 1985) from the highest (1) to lowest (6). Most children (81 per cent) came from intact families. Three of the children had single fathers and eight had single mothers. Thirty-six per cent of mothers were employed full-time, 41 per cent part-time and 23 per cent were not involved in paid work. Ninety-eight per cent of fathers were employed full-time and none were employed part-time (1 was unemployed). There were no differences in socioeconomic status, age or sex composition between children in the three early childhood groups, but more of the mothers with children in childcare centres or combined childcare arrangements were employed.

In all cases parents of children who were suitable for the study were sent a letter and a pamphlet explaining the study and asking if they would consent to be involved. Phone contact was then made and in only three cases did parents decline to participate.

Group 1: Full-time Childcare.

There were 19 children in the full-time (more than 25 hours a week) childcare group, who came from three centres. This was not a random sample because the pool of subjects meeting the age criterion of 3 to 4 years and attending more than 25 hours was not very large. All childcare centres in Dunedin where full-time children attended were contacted in order to obtain subjects. The centres were all open for a full working day. (For further information about early childhood centres in New Zealand see Smith, in press.)

Group 2: Kindergarten. The 20 subjects in this group who attended morning or afternoon kindergarten, were obtained by random selection from the rolls of five Dunedin kindergartens identified by a senior administrator as representing kindergartens varying in socioeconomic status. Kindergarten children in New Zealand attend for half a day (morning or afternoon) either 5 times a week (for 4 year-olds) or 3 times a week (for 3 year-olds).

Group 3: Combined Care. The 20 children in this group participated in more than one early childhood arrangement - childcare, kindergarten or family daycare arrangements (for more than 15 hours a week). Group 3 was not randomly selected but was obtained by contact with childcare staff, family daycare coordinators and kindergarten teachers who helped the researchers to locate 3 to 4 year-old children who were in combined care situations.

Procedure

Some small dolls representing mother, father, teacher and child were used to help focus the child's attention on the interview task and to prompt verbalisation through play-type activity with the doll. A cardboard box was used to represent the child's kindergarten or childcare centre. (A complete interview schedule including detailed instructions to interviewers is available from the first author.) The following questions about what mother, father and teacher did were asked of each child. Questions about mother were asked first, followed by questions about father and then questions about teacher:-

1. Tell me the things that a mother/father/teacher can do?
2. What do mothers/fathers/teachers have to do for children?
3. What are some of the things mum/dad/Z (teacher's name) does for you?
4. What do you like doing best with mum/dad/Z?

The two female research assistants carried out all of the interviews with the children in a quiet room within each early childhood centre. Both research assistants were trained early childhood teachers and were skilled in establishing rapport with young children. They had previously been involved as observers and interviewers in these children's homes and in the early childhood settings, so were not strange to the children.

Children's responses were written down verbatim. Twenty-eight of the fifty-nine interviews were also tape recorded to allow a check on the accuracy of the written records. This assessment showed the written records to be 100 percent accurate in content.

Categories were developed which would allow coding of all the

children's statements. Four main categories of response were derived: Domestic, Childcare, Personal and Paid Work. The first two categories included seven sub-categories each. (See Table 2 for examples of all categories). The child interviews were coded onto content analysis sheets. Children sometimes gave more than one response in a particular category but the data which was analysed included only the presence or absence of responses in a particular category or sub-category for each child and ignored the number of responses. Seven interview protocols were randomly selected and independently scored by a second coder to assess the reliability of the coding procedure. This assessment showed that there was 91.1 percent agreement between the two coders.

Results

Parental and Teacher Roles

Table 1 gives examples of children's responses in each of the categories and sub-categories, and shows the number of responses given in each for mothers, fathers and teachers.

Insert Table 1 about here

The data on total Domestic responses shows that mothers, fathers and teachers were described as doing different amounts of Domestic work (chi-square = 45.89, $p < .001$) with mothers doing the most (almost twice as much as fathers), followed by fathers, followed by teachers. Mothers were perceived to do more meal preparation than fathers or teachers (chi-square = 13.89, $p < .01$), more cleaning than fathers or teachers (chi-square = 18.36, $p < .001$), more washing than fathers or teachers (chi-square = 11.73, $p < .01$) and more sewing than fathers or teachers (chi-square =

8.02, $p < .05$). Fathers, however, were perceived as doing more outdoor work than mothers, followed by teachers (chi-square = 14.25, $p < .001$) and more house repairs (chi-square = 7, $p < .05$).

Overall, children did not see mothers, fathers and teachers as doing different amounts of Child Care (chi-square = 2.76, n.s.) but there was a pattern of differences revealed in examination of the sub-categories. Mothers were perceived by about twice as many children as doing custodial care compared to fathers and teachers (chi-square = 8.87, $p < .05$). Teachers were perceived by more children as providing play/stimulation, followed by fathers, and then mothers (slightly more than half the rate of teachers - chi-square = 7.58, $p < .05$). Mothers and fathers had the same rate of being mentioned as going on outings which was higher than for teachers (chi-square = 11.54, $p < .01$).

Responses describing the adult as a physical and verbal punisher were very low in frequency. There were no significant differences for physical punishment (chi-square = 4.67, n.s.), but fathers were assigned more of these responses than mothers or teachers. For verbal punishment, however, teachers were seen by more children as doing this compared to mothers and fathers (chi-square = 8.67, $p < .05$). Both fathers and mothers received the largest number of responses describing them as giving positive socio-emotional responses to children, and they received more such responses than teachers. Fathers received a significantly greater number of positive socio-emotional responses than teachers (chi-square = 4.8, df = 1, $p < .05$) but mothers did not have a significantly greater number than teachers (chi-square = 2.46, df = 1, n.s.). There were no differences in perceptions of encouragement of child independence by mothers, fathers or teachers (chi-square = 1.26, n.s.).

The other two main categories were Paid Work and Personal. Fathers were more than twice as likely to be described as doing Paid Work as mothers and five times more likely than teachers to be described in those terms (chi-square = 22.40, $p < .001$). Mothers and fathers did not differ in whether they were perceived as doing Personal things but teachers were perceived as doing significantly fewer Personal things than fathers (chi-square = 11.6, $p < .001$) and mothers (chi-square = 9.78, $p < .01$).

Correlations between Children's Perceptions of Adult Roles

The relationship between children's views of mothers, fathers and teachers was examined using correlation coefficients (a detailed data table is available from the author). Correlations between the number of responses individual children gave to the three categories of adult roles were calculated. The results show that there are many positive relationships between children's views of the three adult roles.

For total Domestic responses there is a significant positive correlation ($r = .42$, $p < .01$) between children's views of mothers and fathers as doing domestic things and a lower but statistically significant correlation between children's views of fathers and teachers as doing Domestic work ($r = .29$, $p < .05$). The correlation between children's views of mothers and teachers as doing Domestic things was the lowest and non-significant ($r = .19$).

There were also many positive correlations between the sub-categories of Domestic work perceived to be done by the different adults. For mothers and fathers the only sub-categories of Domestic work not significantly positively correlated were cleaning and outdoor tasks. For mothers and teachers all of the sub-categories were significantly correlated. For fathers and teachers all of the sub-categories were also significantly

correlated. In other words there is some overlap between children's views of the pattern of Domestic responses carried out by the three adults. There is a greater degree of overlap overall for mothers and fathers and for fathers and teachers than for mothers and teachers.

There was also considerable evidence of overlap between children's perceptions of mothers, fathers and teachers as doing Child Care. For mothers and fathers the correlation between total Child Care responses was the highest ($r = .57$, $p < .01$) followed by fathers and teachers ($r = .51$, $p < .01$) and then mothers and teachers ($r = .40$, $p < .01$). For mothers and fathers all the sub-categories of Child Care were significantly positively correlated - the highest being for play/stimulation ($r = .59$, $p < .01$). There were significant (but lower than for mothers/fathers) correlations for all sub-categories of Child Care for mothers and teachers, with the exception of custodial child care where the correlation was near zero (.02). For teachers and fathers all the sub-categories of Child Care were significantly correlated (again lower than for mothers and fathers) except for custodial child care ($r = .06$) and positive socioemotional ($r = 0.20$).

For the category of Paid Work, there were no significant correlations between children's responses to fathers, mothers and teachers. For Personal things there were low but significant correlations between children's views of mothers and teachers ($r = .36$, $p < .01$), fathers and teachers ($r = .34$, $p < .01$) and a lower one still for mothers and fathers ($r = .28$, $p < .05$).

Early Childhood Setting and Perceptions of Adult Roles

Generally speaking there were very few differences in perceptions of adult roles according to whether children were in full-day childcare, kindergarten or combined care. There were far more similarities between

the groups than differences. Nine kindergarten children, however, gave responses describing mothers as giving positive socio-emotional responses while only two children in full-day childcare did (chi-square = 3.85, $p < .05$). Also, 12 kindergarten children described their mothers as doing more activities with them that would lead to independence while only three combined care children did (chi-square = 5.4, $p < .05$). The three early childhood groups did not differ at all in their views of fathers and the only difference for teachers was that 3 kindergarten children and 2 combined care children (chi-square = 4.74, $p < .05$) made responses describing teachers as doing washing while no full-day childcare children did. Given the very low frequency of responses for washing, the meaning of this result is dubious. Other than for the above mentioned instances there were no significant differences in children's perceptions of adult roles according to their early childhood setting.

Discussion

In the present study there was considerable overlap between children's perceptions of mothers' and fathers' roles. Mothers and fathers were not seen as differing in the overall amount of child care that they undertook or in the personal interests and activities that children perceived them as doing.

Despite the considerable overlap between many aspects of children's perceptions of mothers' and fathers' roles there were important differences. A strong distinction emerges between how mothers and fathers are viewed as doing domestic work. Despite the fact that many children described mothers and fathers as doing many of the same domestic tasks mothers usually were perceived as doing more domestic work. These differences follow the traditional sex-stereotyped view of the roles of men

and women, with women doing most tasks inside the home and men doing more outside.

While mothers and fathers were seen as doing similar total amounts of child care, mothers were perceived as doing more custodial child care and fathers were perceived as doing more play/stimulation, a finding closely paralleled by Riach's (1982) study. Perhaps the strongest area of differential perception of mothers and fathers concerns paid work, with mothers perceived as doing very little of this and fathers a great deal. Children did not see their mothers and fathers as doing different personal things.

Like other studies on children's perceptions of roles (Goldman & Goldman, 1983; Riach, 1982), the present study suggested that young children perceived what their mothers and fathers do in sex-stereotyped terms. Despite the very high proportion of working mothers in this sample, mothers were simply not seen as paid workers but rather domestic workers within the home. Even in the area of child care, where fathers were as often mentioned as mothers, children saw mothers as doing the hard core day-to-day child care but fathers as doing more playful activities. It is difficult to say to what extent children's views reflect the reality of their experiences or their own construction of the social world. Ritchie and Ritchie (1970), in their survey of child-rearing patterns in New Zealand, found that mothers did the majority of the child-rearing and domestic work, and that fathers tended to fulfil the role of "fun father". There is also some observational evidence showing that fathers are more stimulating and playful towards their children than mothers (Clarke-Stewart, 1978). Despite New Zealand women's role in the work force they do continue to carry the burden of domestic work in the home (Novitz, 1978) so

it is hardly surprising that children perceive them to be doing so.

Sex stereotyping in children's perceptions of mothers and fathers can also be looked at from a cognitive-developmental perspective. According to Maccoby (1980) preschool children whose cognitive schema are undifferentiated, exaggerate sex-role differences in the process of getting their concepts cognitively clear (Maccoby, 1980). Goldman and Goldman (1983) also found evidence that younger children sex-stereotyped parental roles more than older children.

Whether teachers and parents are perceived as having distinctive or overlapping roles was also of interest in the present study. The strongest difference in teacher and parent roles was in teachers' being perceived as doing more play/stimulation than mothers and fathers. While the overall amount of child care teachers were seen as doing was a little less than parents, children often gave a response suggesting that the teachers role was to be involved in activities and play with them. Encouraging independence, although mentioned a little less than for parents, was a relatively common activity ascribed to teachers, again suggesting that their role is seen as doing things with children. The teacher's role as a professional educator seemed to be well understood by the children. Surprisingly, teachers were not seen very much in a caring role. Although about half of the children spent relatively long hours in childcare settings, teachers were much less likely than mothers to be perceived as providing custodial care. They were also relatively rarely described as providing warm, nurturing responses compared to parents. Although there are some interesting differences in children's perceptions of parental and teacher roles with respect to child care, there is also overlap - more between fathers' and teachers' roles than between mothers' and teachers'

roles.

The difference between between teachers' and mothers' roles is even more marked for domestic roles than for child care. Again fathers are seen to be a bit more like teachers in doing less domestic work (compared to mother). Children do see teachers as involved in domestic roles but to a much less intense degree than they do mothers (and fathers too).

The finding that teachers are seen more as educators and less as carers and housekeepers than mothers is somewhat surprising as preschool children directly experience teachers playing a major role in caring for them generally as well as educating them. Teachers, however, are not seen by children as being so nurturing as parents. Since children share teachers with a much wider group of children than they do parents, they are likely to see teachers' roles in a more restricted manner. Katz (1980) has described the distinction between mothers' and teachers' roles in a similar manner to the way the present children perceived them. Katz (1980) suggested that the intensity of affect is lower between teachers and children than between mothers and children. The teacher's role with respect to the child is described by Katz as more specific and limited than the mother's which is diffuse and limitless. Observational studies (eg Cummings, 1980) confirm that children are much more likely to be attached to their parents than their teachers. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) view of the parental role involving an "irrational commitment" to the child is also consistent with the way the children in this study perceived their parents.

The extent of overlap between children's perceptions of teachers and parents' roles implies that children understand that there are some similar aspects to what their parents and teachers do. Children do perceive consistencies between settings and that the worlds of home and school have

many similarities, although some functions belong more to one setting than the other.

The present children's preschool and childcare experiences seem to have had relatively little influence on their views of the roles of mother, father and teacher although small sample size for the different groups means that results should be treated cautiously. Kindergarten children did describe their mothers as doing slightly more warm nurturing things than full day-care children and also more independence activities. Perhaps these differences are due to the greater time that kindergarten children spend with their mothers, but the differences are rather slight. Generally speaking the results give support to the view that children attending the three types of early childhood settings essentially saw mothers, fathers and teachers in similar terms. The rather different experiences of children in terms of time away from mother or childcare staff doing more "parent-like" things is not reflected in much difference in children's perceptions.

The present study did not replicate the findings of such studies as Mills and Stevens (1985) or Carlson (1984) which did show group differences in children's perceptions depending on childrearing experiences. Possibly the more open-ended interview techniques in the present study were responsible for the absence of group differences. Perhaps a structured interview approach alerts children to responses that are subsequently categorised as differences in role perceptions, while an open-ended strategy gives responses that are less contaminated by the researcher's concepts.

Children's emerging understanding of their environment involves increasing knowledge of the roles, rules and settings in which they

participate. Bronfenbrenner (1977) suggests the need to undertake a "phenomenology of human ecology, that is, an effort to understand what the particular ecological context ... means to persons in it" (p. 284). The present research suggests that the children studied have some clear perceptions of adult roles, but that differential perceptions of mother and father roles represent stereotyping that may not equate with actual role performance in every case. Further research is needed in order to understand the origins of such knowledge and the contexts of developmental changes in role perceptions.

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Table 1

Children's Perceptions of Roles of Mother, Father and Teacher

1. DOMESTIC

Subcategory	Mothers n	Mothers %*	Fathers n	Fathers %	Teachers n	Teachers %	Examples
Meal Preparation	32	54.2	14	23.7	13	22	"make dinner" "she can cook" "make tea - spaghetti and mince"
Cleaning	25	42.4	5	8.5	8	13.6	"clean up my toys" "mum cleans up the mess" "cleans the floor"
Shopping	12	20.3	7	11.9	4	6.8	"shopping - buying presents" "go to the shops" "she goes to the supermarket"
Washing	22	37.3	11	18.6	5	8.5	"hangs out the washing" "puts the washing out" "wash clothes"
Sewing	4	6.8	0	0	0	0	"sewing" "sew patchwork"
Outdoor Tasks	9	15.3	15	25.4	0	0	"cleans garage" "plants the garden" "he built a punga log fence and put in steps"
House/Car Repairs	1	1.7	5	8.5	0	0	"fix cupboards" "hammering some wood"
TOTAL DOMESTIC	105	38.6	57	23.6	30	20.1	
2. CHILD CARE							
Custodial	43	72.9	26	44.1	21	35.6	"puts my clothes on" "bathing Emma" "combs my hair and puts clips in it"
Play/Stimulation	27	45.8	37	62.7	51	86.4	"reads us stories - gives us rides" "helps kids do puzzles"

Table 1 (continued)

Subcategory	Mothers n	Mothers %	Fathers n	Fathers %	Teachers n	Teachers %	Examples
Outings	18	30.5	18	30.5	2	3.4	"takes me for walks" "takes me to the Gardens to feed the ducks"
Physical Punishment	2	3.4	6	10.2	1	1.7	"smack you" "he smacks bottoms too"
Verbal Punishment	2	3.4	0	0	7	11.9	"he growl at somebody" because they are naughty" "tells to go into the bedroom when they're naughty"
Positive Socio-Emotional	17	28.8	21	35.6	9	15.3	"gives Vicky a hug" "she smiles at me" "he cuddles and tickles and kisses"
Encourages	23	39	20	33.9	16	27.1	"helps us tidy up" "I help him put coal in the bucket"
TOTAL CHILD CARE	132	48.5	128	52.9	108	72.5	
3. PAID WORK	16	5.9	36	14.9	7	4.7	"go to work - drafting" "go to work in town" "works - he makes boats at work"
4. PERSONAL	19	6.7	21	8.7	4	2.7	"watches TV" "puts the video on" "talks on the phone"
TOTAL RESPONSES	272	41	242	36.5	149	22.5	

*Percentage of responses in each sub-category refer to the percentage of all subjects giving responses in each subcategory. ie n/59 X 100. Percentages for the main categories refer to the percentages of responses in that category for a particular role compared to the total responses to that role across all categories.